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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RECENT REFORM MOVEMENT IN PHILADELPHIA

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The saying is attributed to Macaulay that "nothing is more humorous than the British public in one of its periodic fits of morality." The thinking people of Philadelphia are now considering whether the recent reform wave, which has reached what is probably its most complete expression in their own city, is a mere periodic fit, or a movement toward higher things with deep-abiding causes and permanent results. For some years the low condition of the political morale in this city has been the cause of widespread comment and criticism; nowhere has the censure been more strong than among the Philadelphians themselves, who may be suspected fairly of a large share in the responsibility for the then existing condition of affairs. The recent election resulted in a sweeping popular condemnation of government by the "Organization," and in order to understand the problem thoroughly, some explanation of this political machine is necessary.

The Organization is the term popularly applied to the irresponsible governing agency which, unknown to either law or constitution, has absolutely controlled the political destinies of Philadelphia during the past decade. Its backbone consisted of the fifteen thousand office-holders—municipal, state and federal—who in one way or another draw salaries from the public purse in exchange for public service. With the election to the Mayoralty of Hon. Samuel H. Ashbridge in 1899, every department was made tributary to its influence; its representatives and agents were to be found in every one of the eleven hundred election divisions of the city. No one could hope to receive public employment unless his application was viséed by his division leader and ward boss. Business men applying to the city authorities for the performance of those services

which the law imposes upon the municipality found in many ways that their applications were treated with scant courtesy unless they were in harmony with the Organization's representatives. The average citizen had been accustomed to follow the line of least resistance in politics; if he adhered to the cardinal maxims of the Organization, "stand pat" and "go along," he was sure of its help in obtaining for himself consideration for his requests and those petty favors such as railroad passes, transfers at schools, complimentary tickets to public entertainments, etc., for which the public have so long depended upon the politicians and which have become the politician's stock in trade in dealing with the non-office-seeking class. The Organization had thus become a vast business system in which the officeholders were the active agents, whose cardinal object was to perpetuate the system in power and themselves in office through their common action and influence.

That this system was dangerous to political independence was thoroughly recognized; that the result might be the establishment of an un-American political dynasty, which might in time lose sight of its responsibility to the people and of its accountability for the use of public purse, was nowhere denied; but in the years of the recent prosperity which Philadelphia, in common with the entire nation, has been enjoying, the average man of business was content to live under an autocratic government, since it left him absolutely free to devote the time to his own private enterprises. Occasionally there were protests heard, but these seemed of no effect. The newspapers of the city have performed a mighty task in keeping awake and prodding public sentiment at a time when even the most optimistic had lost heart. For many years a small group of men, chiefly college graduates, maintained the Municipal League, which was an honest and sincere attempt to organize a permanent municipal party in Philadelphia; but, although the League at one time succeeded in electing a few minority magistrates, yet it had no real strength with the mass of the people. The Democratic party, as the minority national party, might have done much to arouse public sentiment on municipal questions, but through the judicious use of minority patronage, the Organization seemed to be as securely entrenched in one party as in the other. Presently, however, secure in the possession of unlimited power, the Organization threw caution to the winds and entered upon a series of political blunders, of

which its recent repudiation by the people of Philadelphia was the only logical outcome.

Some years ago when the leader of the Organization and his associates were acquiring control of the city it had been their practice to select as candidates for public office business men of high personal repute, and to give to these officials a free hand in the conduct of their offices so long as the subordinates were brought into harmony with the Organization. In the flower of its strength, however, this policy was changed and in place of business men, ward leaders, whose only title to public confidence was the loyalty of their service to the Organization, were placed in power. At the time of the recent election the following important offices were in the hands of men who had received their reward for this cause and no other: Sheriff, County Commissioner, Recorder of Deeds, Register of Wills, City Treasurer, Receiver of Taxes, Harbor Master, Collector of Internal Revenue, Collector of the Port, and several of the magistrates. Coincident with this change in policy came the systematic debauchery of the political life of the city. There was little need of the registry of phantoms as voters, the padding and stuffing of ballot boxes, etc., as the overwhelming Republican majority was quite sufficient under ordinary circumstances to insure the success of any candidates on its ticket. The leaders of the Organization in private have always disclaimed the responsibility for fraud, claiming that it was due to the overzealousness of subordinates, many of whom manufactured majorities in their divisions with the hope of promotion or an increase in salary at the next distribution of municipal patronage. It would be difficult to prove, with the certainty which is required by the law, that these crimes were directly inspired by the leaders of the Organization, but the recent investigations have determined beyond the possibility of doubt that this evil was so widespread that it was inherent in the system and that the perpetrators of wrongdoing were directly encouraged and in many cases rewarded by the Organization which they served.

With this debasement of political morality, there went hand in hand an extraordinary decline in political ideals, especially among the younger men. The custom of the times and the environment suggested a cynical attitude toward political life. Ordinarily it might be expected that leadership in political thought will be recruited largely from among the attorneys whose profession places them in

a position of special responsibility toward the public. All opportunities for public service, however, were closed to the members of this profession, and the other learned professions as well, unless they were willing to sacrifice every shred of independence of thought and action. The rewards for the worship of mammon were most tempting, and those who accepted of them were only too eloquent in justifying themselves by pointing out that the Organization was the necessary result of the logic of the times, and that those who advocated reform were not only morally insincere, but mentally deficient.

Such was the condition of things when in November, 1904, following upon the triumphant re-election of President Roosevelt, who received in Pennsylvania and in Philadelphia majorities unequalled in American political history, the Municipal League disbanded, first calling, however, a meeting of representative citizens at the Bourse, before whom the problem of municipal reform was laid and to whom the question was submitted. This meeting was attended by a large number of representative professional and business men, many of whom had taken no part in former political movements. Especially strong was the element which had hitherto been deterred from political action by the fear that in so doing they would unsettle the system of protective tariffs, which has been a potent factor in the development of Pennsylvania's industrial resources. The re-election of Mr. Roosevelt, however, convinced many honest Republicans that an attack could be made upon the local machine without in any way disturbing the economic policies of the nation. After a preliminary inquiry into the nature of the evils from which Philadelphia was suffering, a Committee of Seventy was organized for the purpose of leading in the fight for higher things. In the preliminary report, which became the basis for the future action of this committee, it was pointed out that the primal source of the misgovernment of Philadelphia lay in the existence of a thoroughly organized, but absolutely irresponsible, political association, which had complete control of the executive, administrative and legislative departments of the government, and which was even then engaged in reaching out its covetous hand toward the judiciary. To fight this Organization effectively, since no appeal could be made to any of the minority parties then existing in Philadelphia, a new party was brought into existence, called

the City Party. A preliminary skirmish was fought in February, when the City Party nominated candidates for offices in several wards, and also placed a magisterial ticket in the field. In order to prevent this new combatant from obtaining some of the minority positions in the magistracy the Organization determined to throw fifty thousand votes of its overwhelming majority to the support of the Democratic candidates. Such was the perfection of political discipline that this plan was carried out with absolute success, and as a result the city party ticket failed everywhere, with the exception of a few school directorships.

But although the first campaign culminated in catastrophe, yet there were many signs that public sentiment was awakening. Public meetings by the score had been held during this campaign, including noonday meetings for business people, and they had been attended with interest and enthusiasm by a large group of people who had previously been absolutely inattentive to their civic responsibilities. Moreover the policy of the Organization in throwing a large quota of its votes to the support of the Democratic candidates, alienated thousands of men who had hitherto tolerated its errors because of their opposition to the principles of the Democratic party. Scarcely had the smoke blown away from this battlefield, however, than the Committee of Seventy, under the guidance of unusually sagacious counsel, commenced a series of prosecutions of election frauds which definitely and conclusively exposed a condition of things which had previously been deemed impossible. It was proven that many election officers were pure myths, and that upon the occasion of an election, men with criminal records had been brought in as impostors from other divisions to serve as election officers, and then after the fraud was accomplished, had disappeared, leaving no trace of their identity. It was proven that when a ballot box was stuffed it was customary to enter upon the list of voters, which the election officers are required to keep, the names of assumed voters, copied alphabetically from the division list; it was proven that names had been voted upon, although their bearers had been dead for a long period of years, or when their owners were not naturalized citizens or had removed to other localities. It had long been suspected that such frauds were practiced in Philadelphia, but with proverbial conservatism the average Philadelphian was unwilling to give credence to suspicions that reflected discredit upon his rulers, until these facts

were made clear even to the dullest and most reluctant comprehension by testimony in the courts of justice. Moreover, the newspapers, with but a single important exception, gave time and space to the examination of municipal wrong-doing, and their admirable work thus paved the way for political revolution.

The passage of the Ripper Bill by the legislature whereby, after 1907, the control of the departments of public safety and public works was vested in councils rather than in the mayor, and the introduction of the proposed extension of the lease of the Philadelphia Gas Works brought public sentiment to a climax. For some months it had been apparent that the mayor of the city, Hon. John Weaver, was not in sympathy with the policy of the Organization, and when, in the desperation of his fight against the gas lease, the mayor dismissed his directors of public safety and public works and appointed men who were loyal to him and to the people, rather than to some outside political authority, it was apparent to all that the opportunity for the people of Philadelphia to regain their freedom had come.

During the summer months political leaders and reformers alike had reached the conclusion that reform was inevitable, but there was a wide divergence of opinion as to the method by which this reform should be accomplished. Upon the one side was a group of honest, well-intentioned men, who regarded Pennsylvania and Philadelphia as so overwhelmingly Republican in their national politics, as to render it necessary that the reform should take place by a movement within the party lines. This sentiment was assiduously encouraged by the leaders of the Organization, who withdrew their own ticket for the county offices to be filled at the November election, and offered to make terms with the Mayor by allowing him to replace a number of the ward leaders with men of his own selection. Upon the other side, was the independent sentiment of the community which regarded the City Party as providentially in position to espouse the people's cause. During the summer months the leaders of this latter party had entrenched themselves in a very strong position. Recognizing the weakness of the Municipal League, they had gone down into the divisions and wherever possible had organized an executive committee of seven men, representative of the best political sentiment in the division. From time to time public meetings were held and a campaign of political education on the

widest possible lines was inaugurated. It is to the eternal credit of Mayor Weaver and his advisers that they refused peremptorily the overtures of the Organization, recognizing clearly that there was no advance in principle in the mere replacement of one set of ward leaders who had been nominated in a large degree by one mayor with a second set to be named in turn by his successor. In the third week of September the Mayor announced his determination to oppose the Organization, and a few days later the City Party held its first primaries and its county convention. A full ticket was put in the field, and during the seven weeks of the campaign the fight was waged with unabated enthusiasm and vigor. In the heat of the battle it is probable that forty to fifty meetings were held nightly, ranging in size from a division meeting of neighbors called at a private house to mass meetings held in the largest halls of the city. It is probable that there never has been a local campaign in which so much literature was circulated. It may happen that the orator will appeal to prejudice and passion, but the wide circulation of statements of cold facts is the best possible proof that, after all, it was the reason of the voters which decided the issue. Noonday meetings were held at all of the large industrial establishments of the city, and thus the arguments reached the working classes.

And now that the campaign has been fought and won, there are a few general reflections which it suggests and which may be of value to other communities struggling for the "square deal" in government.

First. The value of the services rendered by the Committee of Seventy would indicate the necessity of a permanent non-partisan organization to perform the useful and necessary duties of public criticism upon the acts and policies of municipal servants. The office of censor, however distasteful it may be, is just as necessary under the conditions of modern life as in the days of the Roman Republic. If the business of the government is to be committed absolutely to the officeholders, it is to be expected that in time they will learn to disregard public sentiment. Moreover, the average citizen is very unwilling to bring to the attention of the public, evils that come within the scope of his own observation, when he must act alone without the support of any organized body. Under these circumstances, that which is the duty of every one is performed by no one,

and the public suffers. Moreover, it is a truism to-day that municipal questions are essentially non-partisan, and in order that this principle may be properly asserted it is indispensable that there should be some association containing representatives of all the partisan opinions in the community. It is much to be desired that, unlike its prototype, the Committee of One Hundred, the Committee of Seventy will continue in existence permanently.

Second. This election has demonstrated, more than any other which has ever been held in the United States, the independence of the average voter of partisan control when moral issues are presented. The disclosures which had been made to the public relative to the dishonest conduct of the elections and the jobbing in municipal contracts whereby the leaders of the Organization had personally profited, had aroused the spirit of righteousness in the community. While it would be absolutely untrue to state that no honest man voted the Organization ticket, or that the candidates on that ticket were personally in favor of graft or fraud, yet nevertheless the public mind saw clearly that the endorsement of the Organization ticket meant the continuation in power of the political leaders who had encouraged wrongdoing and had profited by it. In spite of tremendous pressure in favor of the personal prestige of the national party, whose leader, President Roosevelt, is deservedly most popular and esteemed in Philadelphia, as throughout the nation, disregarding the pressure which the Organization was able to bring to bear through corporation and other influences, and spurning the most blatant use of money for open bribery which has ever been attempted, the average voter was true to his convictions of right and voted accordingly. In this fact alone there must be profound encouragement for the student of American institutions. Surely many signs in business and financial life, as well as in politics, indicate a re-awakening of the puritanic sentiment in American life. Henceforth, no one can doubt but that in the long run the American people desire honesty in public as well as in private life, and will fight to secure it.

Third. The conditions in Philadelphia suggest the dangers of an office-holding oligarchy not only to the general public but to the office-holders themselves. Those who performed the bidding of the system were immeasurably the worst sufferers under it. When a municipal employee learned that his efficiency was measured by

his ability to carry his division by a round majority for the Organization, the service of the city suffered. When a municipal employee learned that the slightest evidence of political independence on his part would result in the loss of his position, his character suffered. Nor were these the only detriments. Gradually, as the Organization grew in power, the office-holders were assessed for political purposes, and many were compelled to pay dues for the maintenance of political clubs without receiving any return. Presently they were mulcted in a variety of ways for marching clubs, benefits, barbecues, and everything else which was necessary to maintain the prestige of the Organization. It has been demonstrated that many were accustomed to pay a percentage of their annual salary to the ward leader in return for his influence in securing for them their positions. Since the office-holders in the executive departments have been emancipated from this petty tyranny some have stated that their political assessments in one way and another had taken upwards of ten per centum of their annual income, while others have confessed that under the same influence they were dragooned into the commission of crimes from which their own right-thinking souls revolted. There is only one remedy for such a condition, and that is by municipal civil service, which shall be as rigid and as efficient as that which is in vogue in the federal service. Anything short of this may result in a temporary gain, but a permanent and lasting benefit will be impossible.

Fourth. This campaign has brought to the front a large group of young men in whom to-day is the chief hope for the future. In the early months of the City Party struggle the prosperous business man was conservative as to the outcome; the demands of his business made him prudent, and the failure of earlier reform movements rendered him doubly cautious. From the outset the fight has been forced by young men who were not looking for office, and hence were not susceptible to the usual inducement which the Organization has had to offer to placate its opponents. To my mind the most serious error of the Organization, in an examination of its political history, was the absolute neglect of this group. The truculent flatterer was always welcome to its entertainments, and the office-seeker, whose quest made him subservient without limit, was always known to its advisors; but the young man of independence and spirit, whose ideals of political life have been formed

largely upon the models suggested by Theodore Roosevelt and Joseph W. Folk, found all the doors to political activity closed by the Organization and its agents. Indeed for many years in Philadelphia at the average primary election only the office-holders have voted; the party machinery in divisions has been controlled by the office-holders; the nominating conventions have been attended by the office-holders, and the independent has been told that he must either "go along" or be impotent as a political factor. It was only a question of time when the independent would discover his power, but it is now an evident fact in Philadelphia that the Organization and its methods are doomed, and that even the overwhelming Republican sentiment of the city will not give success to the candidates of the Republican Organization unless the party rules are so liberalized as to admit those who desire freedom from party control on municipal questions.

Fifth. The relation of the public service corporations to the municipality was one of the burning issues of the campaign, and there is much reason to believe that Philadelphia is now in position to attempt the solution of this problem. One of the essential characteristics of the City Party movement was its absolute sanity. While the voice of the demagogue was occasionally heard and sometimes his hand could be seen, yet at no time was his influence in control of the movement. It was an organization composed of the more conservative and honest citizens of the community, and as a result the city is now in position to attempt the solution of the corporation problem, without the danger of the radical action which has sometimes accompanied a popular triumph. It is the spirit of Lincoln rather than that of William Lloyd Garrison which has been moving in our midst. All thinking men recognize that the public service corporations perform an indispensable service to the community. The vast majority are agreed in demanding some adequate business return. It will be infinitely better for the corporations to render a proportion of their income in the form of legal taxation to the community which makes them profitable than to submit to illegal extortions in the way of tribute or blackmail to a dominant political machine.

Sixth. The final conclusion is, that the prevailing notion that the average citizen is not interested in the details of the political world whereby he is governed is now an exploded illusion arising

out of former conditions. The average citizen was negligent of his duties, largely because the Organization encouraged his negligence. It was the policy of the Organization to encourage the impression that politics was a fine art in which only the absolute masters of its technique could engage. In the brief space of nine months the people organized a new party, perfected over one thousand division associations, elected their own division officers, held a primary election which was attended by over forty thousand citizens, recorded their convictions through a convention which was absolutely free and untrammeled and forever disposed of the Organization charge that an unbossed convention would be a disorderly mob. In addition to this wonderful interest in the details of politics, the campaign was absolutely supported by popular subscription. More than one hundred and twenty thousand dollars passed through the treasury of the City Party, and of this amount not one cent was collected by political assessment upon office-holders or by contribution from corporations. Nor was this sum contributed by the beneficence of a few millionaires. The largest single contribution was five thousand dollars, and more than three thousand individuals contributed in sums ranging from this figure to twenty-five cents, in order that they might show their interest in the cause. It is probable, therefore, that the historian of the future, in estimating the benefits of this unique campaign, will conclude that the chief good was educational; that the people of Philadelphia manifested an interest in the reform of their government, which led thousands to make sacrifices of time and money in order that they might raise their city from the obloquy into which it had fallen.